

Whale strandings in the Northern Territory IV. A mass stranding of Short-finned Pilot Whales *Globicephala macrorhynchus* on Melville Island

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On 18 March 1999, Coastwatch reported that five whales were stranded along c. 7 km of coast near Cape Van Diemen (11°11'S 130°23'E), on the north-west tip of Melville Island, Northern Territory. The following day RC visited the site and determined that all the whales were Short-finned Pilot Whale (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*). Measurements taken of the whales are given in Table 1. Four of the whales were dead and had been so for up to two days. The fifth, which from its size had only recently been born, was still alive. However, it had been exposed to the sun for some time and was badly sunburnt and, due to its poor condition and small size, was euthanased. One of the whales had been attacked by a large shark and was missing both tail flukes and had a number of bites to the tail stock, although it was impossible to determine whether this had occurred at sea or after the stranding. Another of the whales had been attacked, probably after death, by a large Estuarine Crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*).

There is no evidence to confidently suggest a reason for this stranding, although the topography of the area may have had an influence. The area between the north-west tip of Melville Island and an island c. 5 km offshore becomes very shallow during the lowest tides, with a few deeper channels. At the time of the stranding there were spring tides and low tides were very low with rapid changes in water levels. It is possible that in attempting to round this point in shallow water one or more of the whales may have become stuck, leading to a number of whales stranding. It is not known whether the five stranded whales represent an entire pod or were part of a larger group. Five is a fairly small pod size for this species (R. Warneke pers. comm.), but no other whales were seen in the area during the Coastwatch flight or subsequent investigation by Parks and Wildlife Commission staff.

Apart from a single record from Alaska, Short-finned Pilot Whales are known from tropical and subtropical waters of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans (Watson 1981). There are 19 strandings of *G. macrorhynchus* in Australia recorded on the National Cetacean Strandings Database (Environment Australia). This is the first definite stranding of this species reported for the Northern Territory although there have been three other reported strandings involving unidentified *Globicephala* spp. Most strandings

of *G. macrorhynchus* in Australia have involved only one or two individuals, with two reported strandings of 60 and 54 animals from Tasmania and southern Western Australia respectively.

Table 1. Measurements from stranded Short-finned Pilot Whales. (One specimen was not measured).

No.	Sex	Genital to anus length (mm)	Total length (m)	Teeth per side (upper / lower jaw)	Pectoral fin length (mm)	Dorsal fin height (mm)
1	F	100	3.2	9 / 9	500	290
2	M	500	5.0	7 / 8	820	390
3	F	-	3.8	-	-	230
4	M	250	1.5	9 / 9	-	-

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References

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